



Are We Ready For An African-American President?

August 4, 2008

Discussion Notes

Opening Comments

Welcome from TEAM Westport.

Principles of an “Open Space” meeting:

- Whoever comes is the right people
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen
- Whenever it starts is the right time
- When it ends, it's over

and The Law of Two Feet: Everyone has two feet; be prepared to use them.

For more on TEAM Westport, see www.teamwestport.org

For more on the process we used, see www.openspaceworld.com.

What Might Happen Next?

- Hold the same discussion with a more diverse audience, e.g., Norwalk
- Invite other communities into the process, e.g., Wilton, intergenerational audience
- Introduce this process and subject into area high schools in the fall
- Take one topic as a subject for the entire evening and invite relevant, related groups who might have a different perspective
- Get publicity on the process used tonight and the points raised
- Mirror this process and subject in community congregations; invite the Interfaith Council to participate more fully
- Consider changing the format to include informed speakers with a question and answer/discussion period
- Consider adding other topics in the future:
- will a Barack Obama election improve the lot of African-Americans?
- if Obama is elected, how might we as a nation prepare for improving the lot of African-Americans?

Small Group Discussion Notes

Group 1 – Will an African-American president provide inspiration and a feeling of inclusion to millions of Americans currently feeling disenfranchised?

- 1) We agree that he will inspire a feeling of inclusion.
- 2) We agree that this candidacy inspired thousand who had never participated in the electoral process to register and vote.
- 3) Will millions of white Americans voting for a Black man inspire a change in Black/White relations?

Group 2 – Will people do as they say and say as they do in voting for an African-American for President?

The following was presented in the meeting:

- Yes, hidden racial prejudice exists in the country.
- If it did not, we believe polls would show a larger percentage favoring Obama. The small poll differences between Obama and John McCain are likely evidence of racism.
- People are likely to say one thing and do another.
- “Experience” could equate to a code word for prejudice.
- Hillary Clinton supporters are likely to back Obama in the end.
- It is important to know with whom Obama will surround himself.
- For Obama supporters, there is a tough road ahead.

The following was submitted by e-mail after the meeting by group discussion leader Gloria Sugarman:

Our team chose the subject of hidden racial prejudice or people who will say one thing and vote the opposite way.

Among the related subjects covered were:

1. People who have not yet made up their minds (the undecided) which some suspect may be an excuse for not supporting Obama. One of our group said she was in that category because she doesn't feel she really knows Obama yet.
2. Another woman reported that a man said to her ²If a white male says he will vote for Obama, he will probably vote against him.²

3. Someone observed that staunch Hillary supporters may not go to polls rather than vote for Obama.
4. Someone questioned whether the small percentage of difference between McCain and Obama in the recent polls indicates a hidden racism.
5. Another person suggested that Obama's move to the center on such issues as FISA and global warming may cost him some of his core supporters among the young.
6. The main issues identified in this election are: abortion, gun control, Iraq, the Supreme Court and above all, the economy.
7. The choice of vice-president, while usually not crucial, is judged to be very important in this election.
8. McCain's accusation that Obama "used the race card" in talking about what the opposition would say about him was judged to be ridiculous.
9. The accusation that Obama is "elitist" was judged by one person as proof that "people in this country don't want a leader who is smarter than they are."
10. The fact that Obama's triumphant Middle Eastern and European tour did not result in a bump up in the polls may indicate that Americans don't care about world opinion.
11. People want to know who he will surround himself with as advisers, cabinet members, etc. Others said that even questioning that shows a double standard because the same question would not be asked about his opponent.
12. Related to the elitist image, someone questioned whether class makes a difference.
13. Finally people wondered "how dirty will this campaign get?"
14. Ultimately we seemed to agree that hidden racial prejudice exists and may not show up in the polls.

The following was submitted by e-mail after the meeting by group discussion leader Karen Schur:

Younger populations do not carry with them the same blinders when considering a black president as do older voters. Their experiences have been different, so they don't have the same baggage and can respond to the issues with a greater openness.

The trust issue continues to resurface due to Reverend Wright, even though handled amazingly well. Is there more that we just don't know or has not been revealed yet?

What people say and what they may do when in the booth can be different, and we cannot assume/presume everyone is clear on what their choice is.

Group 3 – Small percentage

- 1) People do make decisions based on race, and you can't change their minds.

2) There are many issues that are greater than race in this contest:

- the economy
- war
- the environment
- democracy
- age
- gender
- Obama's leadership qualities

3) The many changes and advances in this country in the last 20 years will also have an impact, e.g., technology, as will familiarization with the idea of an African-American president in the popular television show "24".

Group 4 – The need for a multicultural perspective and the impact of an African-American president on the international community

- The U.S. is increasingly multicultural beyond simply Black/White.
- Spread awareness of cultures beyond Westport, since learning about diversity leads to increased empathy for others different than ourselves.
- We need to think beyond individual nations and cultures for the sake of the future.
- Reaction against an articulate African-American leader who has the breadth to deal with international issues.
- Appreciation of differences.
- Create the basis for buy-in/psychology/become part of this country/a seat at the table.

Group 5 – What can be done about the related rumors that Barack Obama is a "closet Muslim" and anti-Israel?

- These rumors are misinformation designed to instill fear
 - Iran
 - Holocaust
- Media manipulation
 - post 9/11
 - increase Arab fears
- We are not ready for a Black president.

- Is Muslim/Israeli question a veil to avoid the race question?
- Are these rumors are a ploy to drive a wedge between the historic ties between Jews and Blacks?
- Education and generation gap

Other Topics Proposed But Not Discussed

- Relationship between race and gender?
- Is there really generational racism?
- Don't forget other issues: human rights, poverty, education, prejudice.